



Food Alliance Certification Helps Farm Family Find Its Place

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ASPERS, Pa. — Selling product face-to-face to a consumer has its rewards and pitfalls. For the Wenks, a seven-generation farming family from Adams County, the rewards far outweigh the negatives and it opens up markets for their business to grow.

But in this age of “know your farmer, know your food,” the Wenks have realized that setting up shop in the middle of the city is not as easy as just putting a crate out and filling it with scrumptious Granny Smith apples.

Quality and price are important, but some people also want to know how the fruit is grown and what practices are being used.

That's where they hope their new Food Alliance Certification will fill a gap.

“It does give us validity with our customers,” said Ben Wenk, a seventh-generation farmer.

He, along with his dad, David, and his uncle, John, operate Three Springs Fruit Farm, a 400-acre tree-fruit operation just outside Aspers.

On Wednesday, they hosted a small field day on Food Alliance Certification that was jointly sponsored by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA).

Ben got interested in the Food Alliance after hearing a talk from Scott Exo, executive director of the Portland, Ore.-based Food Alliance, at the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention in Hershey, Pa.

“It seemed like they had a lot of connections built into their label,” he said.

He took a self-assessment on the Internet and found that many of the things the farm was already doing, such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM), extensive pheromone disruption and using more environmentally friendly practices, potentially qualified the farm to become Food Alliance Certified.

So he filled out an application and within a short time, a third-party inspector was at the farm evaluating it for certification.

The farm officially became Food Alliance Certified in early August. But the timing, in the middle of peach harvest, couldn't have been worse.

“Once we got it, we were just scrambling to get at least something out there,” he said.

Safe to say, it's probably too early to tell whether or not having the certification has paid off.

But if it's done one thing, it has given the Wenks a potential marketing tool to stand out from other farms.

“Here, we were doing all of these great things,” said David Wenk. “But we didn’t have a category to fit in. Hopefully, this will change that.”

Susan Beal, ag science adviser with PASA, said the experience varies with each farm.

“Food Alliance Certification is not for everyone. For everybody’s farm and system, things will be a little different,” she said.

PASA has partnered with Food Alliance to bring the program to farms in the Northeast.

On its website, PASA lists five farms in the region that have gained certification, including two farms that grow fruit, a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm and two others that raise various types of livestock.

The requirements vary per farm operation and type.

Once a farm receives its whole farm certification, the owners can actually choose which items to have third-party certified.

The Wenks have chosen apples and peaches, their most valued products.

It hasn’t been the easiest program to get into.

David Wenk said the paperwork is, at times, “laborious.” The farm also had to change aspects of its employee handbook. There are also fees involved, including a \$400 application fee and an annual fee, based on a percentage of gross sales of certified products.

Beal said the money helps pay for the third-party inspectors as well as promotional items.

The Wenks received a number of promotional materials, including signage, that they were able to display at their farmers markets.

What makes this program distinctive, though, is that it also requires farmers to commit to and make verified improvements every three years when their inspections are up.

It’s something David said he has no problem with adhering to.

“They want you to keep improving. That’s what you’re going to do anyhow,” he said. “If you farm and keep doing the same thing year after year, you’re slowly going out of business.”

Beal said it’s up to the farmer to decide how to use the certification.

“There are a bunch of different ways to use the certification. Know your market; know what the talking points are. Talk to people about the label,” she said.

And getting people to recognize the label, in the end, will mean success or failure for the Wenks. They hope other farmers will follow suit to give the program some much-needed publicity.

“There is a lot of education to be done. The more people we will get involved, I think the better off we will be,” Ben Wenk said.

Trackback:

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